

Catch Your Breath by [taylor_tut](#)

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Summary:

A fic from my Tumblr! Richie has to flee from Pennywise with a chest infection and almost dies but Eddie won't let that happen.

Catch Your Breath

After the third time in one conversation that Richie had trailed off of laughing to lean away and cough from deep in his lungs, Ben frowned.

“You still smoke, Richie?” he probed disapprovingly. “I thought you quit when the scientists found out it gives you cancer, like the rest of us.”

Richie finished hacking and blinked the tears out of his eyes, still smiling but red in the face. “I did,” he admitted. “I was a little under the weather like two weeks ago and the cough won’t go away.” Eddie perked up at that, and Richie noticed, waving him off with one nonchalant hand. “It’s fine; I’m fine. No need to get your panties in a twist, Dr. K.”

Eddie tried not to flush. “Have you seen a doctor?” he asked. “What were you sick with?” The cough sounded pretty bad, in his opinion, for someone who’d been “over” a cold for that long. Richie shrugged.

“I dunno. Didn’t bother seeing anybody about it because I had shows to do. I had to cancel one because my voice was gone and I felt too crappy to even get up off the couch, so my manager was pissed. I just drank honey and muscled through it, because I’m super tough and sexy.”

Eddie rolled his eyes, but not without a wince as Richie began coughing again, long and hard.

“Maybe you should see somebody, Richie,” Bill suggested. “That sounds terrible.”

“Look, if you all keep acting like your mothers, I’m gonna start to get horny, and SOMEBODY is going to have to deal with it,” he warned. “I’m FINE. End of discussion. Can we move on?”

For as long as Eddie could remember, Richie had been sensitive about illness. All the losers were a little, particularly around Eddie, since they were afraid to send his anxiety spiraling, but none more so than

Richie. Whereas the others would just stay home if they were sick so as not to be around Eddie at all until they were feeling 100%, Richie would go off the deep end in the other direction, adamantly denying that he was ill to anyone who asked and putting on a ridiculous, unnecessary act in front of Eddie or anyone who might tell Eddie if they figured it out. He'd gotten, Eddie hated to admit, really good at it. In middle school, it had been easy to tell when he wasn't feeling well, but by high school, he was an expert at hiding it. He would force himself to keep up rapid-fire jokes while burning up with fevers that should have had his brain fried over-easy, to ride his bike several miles to and from school with chest infections, to finish his whole lunch to ward off suspicion only to throw it up in the bathroom because he knew he'd had the stomach flu.

The worst part about it was always the fear in his eyes when they asked if he was feeling ill. It was like being sick was the worst thing that could possibly happen to him, like he was just as hesitant to admit it to himself as he was to his friends.

"Alright, alright," Bill agreed, throwing his hands up in mock surrender. "You're a big kid, now. You can take care of yourself."

Eddie had his doubts about that, but he allowed the conversation to drift away from the subject of Richie's health and watched diligently as Richie seemed to visibly decompress. He tried to remind himself that Richie was grown, now: they all were. He wasn't some stupid teenager with a bad case of FOMO and thinking he was invincible. Perhaps he'd changed; Eddie certainly had. However, looking at Richie, who he retroactively noticed had spent most of his time sitting during every conversation and strolling comfortably behind the group when they walked from place to place, he couldn't nullify the seed of doubt in his stomach that threatened to bloom.

Beverly had run out of creamer. That was what sent Richie and Eddie out to the store because while Richie had been the one who offered to drive out and pick some up, citing a need to get out of the house and to think about something else for a little while, Eddie had asked to tag along and Richie could never say no to Eddie.

The walls were thin and Eddie's was close enough to Richie's to have heard him up most of the night coughing, every night since they'd gotten to Derry for the past few days. It was only getting worse, in Eddie's opinion, but every time he tried to bring it up, Richie brushed him off, more and more irritably as he became more sleep-deprived. However, every time he snapped, he always caught himself, softening the harsh edge of his tone with a joke so utterly Richie that it had everyone else fooled.

Not Eddie.

Richie had requested that they take his car because his CDs were in the radio, so Eddie had climbed into the passenger seat without much complaint. While he couldn't be sure that it was on purpose, Eddie suspected that he'd turned the radio up loudly both to discourage having to make conversation and to cover up the sound of his breathing, which was slowly, over the course of the past few days, becoming wheezy and strained. Every time Eddie reached for the volume to try to turn it down and ask him about it, Richie glared and dialed it up even louder, so he stopped that pretty quickly. Richie, as shameless as he could be, always needed to be in control of the conversation, of what other people thought of him, and there was no getting past the barriers he set up, the falsely-transparent walls of oversharing so manipulatively that he let people think that they knew every single detail of his life when they had barely even scratched the surface.

"So, you're married now, huh?" he asked. "What's that like?"

"You don't know?"

Richie laughed. "Does that surprise you?"

"Well, yeah," Eddie said so plainly that Richie flushed pink. "I mean, I guess I thought you'd grow out of that whole 'not wanting to settle down' thing. Just never found the right lady?"

He laughed again, this time a little bitter, like he was telling a joke to which only he knew the punchline.

"You could say that."

"What does that mean?"

"We're here," Richie said a little prematurely, speeding across the parking lot and into a space next to the doors.

Eddie wanted to talk to Richie. He remembered Richie being closed off in these sort of weird ways: it had always felt like, with Richie, it was easy to step on land-mines of topics, in which Richie would make a joke, then get pissed if pressed to be serious. There were things that were just better avoided, and relationships and women were always one of those things. He'd hoped that the fame would change that—maybe now that Richie could actually get some, he wouldn't be so weird and touchy about the subject of sex or dating or marriage, but Eddie felt even tenser now trying to talk about it than he s a child.

"Well?" Richie prodded, leaning casually against the door he'd opened for him while Eddie was lost in thought. "Are you coming in?"

He shook his head to clear the thoughts from it and then forced a smile. "Yeah," he replied, "yeah. I'm right behind you."

Eddie followed Richie into the convenience store, feeling a bit overwhelmed by the odd, disconcerting familiarity of it all. It was like watching a remake of a horror movie he'd seen years ago: he'd most certainly seen it all before, but that didn't mean that he knew what was around the corner.

He wondered if it would end the same way as the first time had and he didn't know if he dared to hope it didn't.

"I think the creamer is in the very back," Richie said. "Do you need anything else?"

Eddie nodded. "Yeah, I was gonna pick up a few things while we're out. Meet you at the register?"

Richie's face broke into a wide smile. "Like we used to," he replied. Eddie remembered that—frequently, their allowances would be taken from them by the Bowers' gang, so all they'd have left were the few coins that they managed to hide in their pockets. When they wanted to buy candy, they'd split up in the store so they could cover all their

bases—chocolatey, fruity, and sour—and then meet at the register to pool their money and split the candy two ways.

After splitting up, Eddie could hear Richie coughing again, really hard, like he'd been holding them in so as to not freak Eddie out by coughing in the enclosed space of the car. Perhaps that was why he'd been distant, Eddie thought: he couldn't have been taking a full breath with all that congestion in his lungs. It sounded terrible and Eddie winced.

He went straight to the pharmacy aisle and began to fill his arms with everything he thought Richie might need: Vapor rub to help him breathe, expectorant to help him actually clear his lungs, ibuprofen to ease the soreness, because even though Richie only let himself wince and rub his chest when he thought no one was looking, Eddie didn't like how the pain had seemed to go from "only after a coughing fit" to "any time he took a deep breath."

By the time he finished gathering the supplies he needed, he regretted not grabbing a basket from the front of the store. He looked around for Richie and could see only the top of his head over the shelves, but when he rounded the corner, his stomach did a flip. Richie was leaning against the refrigerated section doors, his forehead pressed against the cool glass and leaving a small ring of condensation around where the warmth of his skin was heating it. He looked actively ill, not like someone who was "feeling better, but couldn't shake the cough."

"Richie," he called out gently, startling him anyway. "You okay?"

"Peachy," he tried for cheerful but landed closer to exhausted. "Ready to go?" He had a pint of hazelnut creamer in his shaking hands and seemed to notice the stack of medication in Eddie's grip late. "The hell's all that for? You sick, Eds?"

"Don't—" he cut himself off from a spiel about how much he hated that nickname, recognizing deflection when he saw it. "No, I'm not. But you are."

Richie's face contorted into a sort of shocked, sort of touched, mostly confused expression. "That's for me?"

"Yeah."

"All of it?"

"Well, yeah," Eddie shrugged. "Why are you acting so surprised?"

Richie bounced onto his heels, then the balls of his feet, then his heels again. "Nobody's ever really taken care of me before," he admitted, "not like this, anyway. It's weird."

Eddie rolled his eyes. "It's not weird," he argued. "It's normal to have people care about you. You'd know that if you ever fucking let them."

Richie opened his mouth to speak, then shut his jaw with a click of his teeth. He looked like he might be trying to sort out how to react, and Eddie would have loved nothing more than to stay there in the dairy aisle of a store he hadn't seen in over two decades, looking at the man he hadn't thought about for 27 years and then had proceeded to not STOP thinking about for the last several days.

However, like it always did, life had other plans.

Pennywise had other plans.

"Richie!" he shouted, shoving him out of the way as a hand reached through the open glass refrigerator door. He had to pry Richie's jacket out of its wiry-fingered, vice-like grip.

"Holy shit!" Richie yelled as Eddie yanked him by the arm. They ran.

It wasn't long before it became clear that Richie wasn't keeping up. The coughing was not only deep and breathless, but near-constant, too, and it was slowing them down. Eddie had to force himself not to leave Richie behind as his full-speed-ahead sprint was barely more than a stumbling jog, even factoring in the adrenaline rush. Every time Richie slowed down, Eddie was right there to yell at him, to tug him by the arm and tell him he had to MOVE, damn it, but they could only keep that up for so long.

"Eddie," Richie called, trailing off into a coughing fit. This time, he couldn't talk through it, couldn't see through the wetness that it

brought to his eyes, and he began to sway on his feet from the lack of air. "I can't."

"You've got to," he argued firmly.

"You go." He wasn't sure why that made him angry, but it did. What the hell was Richie thinking, telling him to go on without him? How dare he think that was an option?

Eddie veered off onto a path that took them directly to the wooded shortcut they'd used to take home from school as kids and pulled Richie into a bush. Behind him, he could hear the horrible, uneven footsteps of the dancing clown, bouncy and all-too-eager to devour both of them whole. Richie was struggling to catch his breath, panting in wheezy, painful-sounding huffs that Eddie hated to admit were too loud to ignore.

"Richie, you've got to breathe with me, okay?" he whispered as calmly as he could, kneeling in front of Richie to try to force his focus. "In and out, slowly."

"Can't—" he gasped like he was choking, like he'd just been pulled from the river and could still drown even though he was on dry land. "Fuck—hurts."

His lips were tinged a faint bluish hue, and as much as that made him panic, it was calling their names and that was much more pressing.

"Richie Tozier," he heard the voice, awful and chilling. "Eddie Kaspbrack. Get ready to play!"

"You've got to breathe slowly and quietly, Rich. I know it's hard, but if you can't, we're gonna get killed. Can you do it?"

Richie didn't hesitate to nod.

Eddie ducked behind the bush to hide with Richie, and from there, everything happened fast. They sat there silently, more silently than Eddie would have thought Richie was capable of in his condition. Pressed in close as they were, he could feel the heat of fever pouring off him in worrying waves.

God, he was so sick. Why would he even agree to come back to Derry like this?

Richie snapped Eddie out of his thoughts by slumping against him, and when Eddie looked over, he almost screamed. Richie had been so quiet not by controlling his breathing, but by stopping altogether: one hand was now listlessly resting against his face where it had previously clamped his mouth and nose shut until he'd passed out from lack of air.

"Richie," he whispered harshly. "Richie, wake up."

But he didn't, and it was in that instance that Eddie realized that some combination of the breath-holding and the chest infection had made it so he did not start breathing instinctively in unconsciousness. His chest was still and his lips and fingernails were turning blue.

Eddie did the only thing he knew how to: he pushed Richie over and hit him as hard as he could in the dead center of the chest, nearly crying in relief when Richie coughed and sputtered back to life.

The relief was short lived, however, because the sound had alerted Pennywise. In a flash, he was standing in front of them, Richie still coughing and unable to catch his breath. Pennywise smiled.

"Found you," he announced victoriously.

Something in Eddie snapped. Whether it was the disgust he felt at the sight of that awful fucking clown or the sound of Richie still struggling to even breathe, or some combination, instead of fear, Eddie felt nothing but anger.

"I'm not afraid of you!" he shouted. "You really think I'm gonna worry about some stupid clown when Richie is--" he couldn't bring himself to finish the sentence, didn't even know how to. "You know what? You should be scared of me. I'll fucking kill you myself."

Suddenly, It transformed, form flickering from Pennywise to the leper, but Eddie felt no fear--in fact, it made him angrier. He took a step forward it rather than away and it scurried into the forest like a frightened animal.

He turned back to Richie, who had finally managed to catch his breath, even if it was still ragged and wet.

“Eddie, holy shit!” he giggled, the sound bubbling up from his chest like music. “That was amazing! YOU'RE amazing!” He broke off coughing but still smiling and Eddie managed a chuckle despite himself.

“Yeah, yeah, he brushed off the compliment. “Take it easy. You were in respiratory arrest, like, five minutes ago. I think you have pneumonia.”

“Who cares about me?” he laughed.

“I care, you dumbass,” Eddie replied so sternly that it wiped the mirth from Richie’s face. When the grimn dropped, he looked sick and exhausted. “I think we should get you to a hospital.”

He helped Richie to his feet, supporting more of his weight than he would have liked, while Richie continued to babble.

“Just wait until I tell the guys about this,” he declared. “They’ll never believe it.”

Eddie smiled despite himself.